



Conscious Life presents

## People Pleasing as a Trauma Response

Guest: Matthias Barker

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### **[00:00:09] - Alex Howard**

Welcome, everyone to this interview where I'm talking with my friend Matthias Barker, and we're exploring people pleasing.

We're exploring why we can have these tendencies, the impacts they can have in our lives, but most importantly, how we can break free. How we can really cultivate a relationship with ourselves, but also the people in our lives where it's reciprocal.

We really get our needs met and we're cultivating healthy dynamics in relationship.

To give you a little bit of Matthias's background, Matthias Barker is a licensed mental health counselor, specializing in the treatment of complex trauma, childhood abuse and marital issues.

He holds a master's degree in clinical mental health counseling from Northwest University and is currently located in Nashville, Tennessee.

Matthias is widely recognized for his unique approach to making mental health knowledge and skills accessible to the wider public. Matthias delivers psychoeducational content to a following of over 5 million people, particularly across his social media platforms.

His innovative blend of engaging content and relevant mental health advice has fostered a vibrant online community centered on healing, personal growth and moving toward meaning in the midst of hardship.

So, firstly, Matthias, welcome and thank you for joining me.

### **Matthias Barker**

Yes, thank you so much for having me.

### **Alex Howard**

So, I think this is a really interesting topic we're getting into today. We're looking at people pleasing, but as a trauma response. So I feel like maybe the first place is maybe to give some definitions of what people pleasing is, and then let's look at it in the context of how it can be a response to trauma.

### **[00:02:03] - Matthias Barker**

Well, people pleasing is the desire to want to come off in the best way possible, to attend to other people's needs, to be kind of a nurturing and pleasant presence in the lives of others, but for the explicit purpose of feeling safe, feeling like we belong, feeling like the anxiety that's inside of us is soothed.

Now, it's not bad to want to be a pleasant presence in someone's life or please people, of course, but the dysfunction of it is that it's compulsive and that doesn't pay attention to some of the red flags that are in other people's behavior.

And so instead of trying to negotiate, like, a mutual relationship, where I move towards you, I see if you move towards me, I do something kind towards you, I see if you reciprocate, and then we build trust based off of how both people are acting in a relationship, and people pleasing is very one sided.

I'm only good, kind, dependable, loyal, regardless of what you do back to me. And then almost like, if you give me negative feedback or if you take advantage of me or exploit me or disregard me, I take that as a cue that I'm not doing good enough. Does that make sense?

I misinterpret red flags as I need to do better and then that pushes people into relationships where they experience exploitation and abuse on a really extreme...

### **Alex Howard**

Yeah. It also strikes me that one of the things that's often happened with people pleasing is that we're giving to someone else with the expectation that we want something back.

And so although it can be tied up with a more sort of purest kind heartedness, there's also this sense of I need you to be this way either for me to feel safe or to meet this need for me. And so I think often people feel this disempowerment and disappointment that they're then doing all of this, but they're not getting what they need.

### **Matthias Barker**

Certainly. Well, even the way that they're trying to approach people often comes across as very smothering, very draining, very overwhelming, because the need that's internal is just so vast and so deep because there's just been a lot of hurt, there's a lot of pain. That's why we're calling it a trauma response, because it's based in trauma.

The trauma that perhaps aroused this people pleasing behavior really comes off like a lot for someone else. And so people are very quick, even if it's not like an abusive thing, it's not someone who's taken advantage.

Healthy people who encounter people pleaser will kind of push them away or keep them at a distance. And the people pleaser, like you're saying, in response, will feel ignored, will feel used, will feel like, how dare you? And they often will come off with either a very passive aggressive version of kind of blame and cynical kind of sneering towards them, like there's just a lot of bitterness and almost kind of passive aggression that's given to them, or they'll just be downright critical depending on the personality of the person. So that's also kind of part of the dysfunction as well.

### **[00:05:11] - Alex Howard**

Yeah. It also strikes me that apart from the obvious reality that people often burn out when they do a lot of people pleasing, there's also, I think it's a very painful place to be because there's all this

energy going into what we're trying to do for others, but then because we're hoping that others are going to take care of us in response. No one is taking care of us.

**[00:05:32] - Matthias Barker**

Yeah. There's this almost internal script of why can't someone love me just as well as I love them.

Why am I always the one trying the hardest in relationships?

Why am I always the one who's being attuned and attentive and caring and offering support and I never have anyone there for me?

It can push you into a sense of just kind of hopelessness and bitterness and cynicism very quickly because it feels like, okay, this emptiness that I feel inside is never actually going to be filled up.

This loneliness that I feel so pervasively, there's nothing I can do that will make someone love me. That means, and this is the distorted thinking that means there must just be something wrong with me, that I just must be something despicable and unlovable. And that's where shame will spiral people down into that bitterness.

**Alex Howard**

Yeah. And if we can also, I want to come in in a minute to some of the childhood trauma that can shape these dynamics, but if we can also say a few words to often people that have these tendencies, and obviously it's a continuum, I think we can all have this in a way, but there's obviously more extreme versions, that often sets up certain dynamics in their relationships, right? That often people would attract certain types of dynamic in relationship by engaging in this way.

**Matthias Barker**

Yeah, that's a great point. I mean, I think that the first thing that comes to mind is people pleasers will often attract romantically to people who are a bit avoidant, or people who are a bit narcissistic.

And the reason for that is you could think about, okay, so if this internal wounding of people pleasing is I never received the love, care and nurture that I desired as a kid from my parent, and maybe we should touch on that for a moment, I don't think we've touched on the core wounding of that, that would actually inform why the attraction is there. If we can take a little detour for a second.

But that's really where this wounding comes from is, I grew up with mom and dad not being able to attune to my needs, emotionally or physically, in extreme situations, and that created an inner conflict in me that I respond to by this compulsive people pleasing behavior.

So it's hard, because I think a lot of us who have these people pleasing tendencies, we don't look back on our childhood and think like, oh, I had this abusive mom and dad, or this really, a lot of us have parents that, hey, we had generally positive experiences with.

Everyone's different. I'm not saying that for everyone listening. I'm just saying that if we kind of looked at the crowd, so to speak, a lot of us would say, hey, there's certainly things that could have been better, but all in all, things were generally positive.

And even in moments like that, it's not so much that people have to have ill intentions to miss a child's needs. It's just the circumstance of life that not every parent knows how to read their child's minds. And sometimes parents are distracted by the stresses of their circumstances, and that leaves the child feeling unseen and unheard.

**[00:08:35]**

And regardless of whether the parents have a good reason or not, that damage still kind of occurs in the emotional world of the child. And so I can think of people I've known in my life that had siblings who were sick, who were chronically ill, and they were constantly in the hospital with the sibling who was really just fighting to stay healthy, fighting to stay alive.

And then a sibling kind of gets ignored or pushed into the background because of that circumstance. That's the most understandable thing in the world.

But that doesn't mean the damage didn't happen, that doesn't mean that the loneliness wasn't felt and experienced, that they were in the background, I mean, for an understandable reason but regardless, they still were in the background and that had an effect on them.

And the effect that we're talking about here is that feeling of, I have needs, they're not being satiated by my parent, they're not being attended to by my parent. And I'm a child, I'm ill equipped to fill them myself.

I don't know how to fill these needs on my own because I'm four or I'm three or whatever. So that just means they go unfilled. And then I experience this overwhelmed by that, by my needs not being filled. And then I find a way to cope with it.

One of the ways that we cope with it is by trying to be as pleasant and as likable as possible to everyone around us in the hopes that someone will fill my cup, that someone will nurture me the way I'm trying to nurture everyone else in my life.

And that's where, as you're kind of describing, the behavior can come with strings attached. That I'm going to be all these positive things towards you in the hopes that you'll be all these positive things towards me, because I feel so empty inside.

And that is kind of the main dysfunction that then leads us into complicated romantic relationships, because the thing that attracts us more than anything is not necessarily someone who fulfills all our needs.

You think it would be that, it's not, because the people pleasers dilemma is not needing to be loved, it's wanting to earn dysfunctional love. And for everyone listening, I really want you to zero in on that. It's not the desire for love, it's to earn it.

Because the dysfunction, the story that the inner child is telling him or herself about why they didn't get their needs met is, like we were just saying, there's something wrong with me.

There's something wrong with me that I'm this needy. If I wasn't so needy or if I wasn't so sensitive, if I wasn't so fragile, then I would receive love. Like you look around you and you're seeing your cup empty and everyone around you is telling you, why is your cup empty? Your cup should be full. If your cups half full that's your problem.

And so there's this deep desire internally to find a romantic partner that mirrors that dysfunction, and then, maybe if I can just be good enough, I can earn that love. And then it corrects the whole experience. It's like, oh, I'm not crazy, I'm not oversensitive, I'm not pathetic, I'm not weak, I'm okay. And it feels like I'm filled up.

And that's part of the dysfunction, because it's ironic from the outside looking in, if you don't relate to this people pleaser dilemma, you can see maybe you have in your head someone who's kind of high maintenance, someone who's, I don't know, kind of a people pleaser.

**[00:11:50]**

And they're like, gosh, they seem to go for really toxic people. They seem to kind of gravitate towards people who don't treat them well. The reason for that is because I want to go to something that reminds me of the neglect that I experienced as a kid, but earn it this time.

And if I can earn it this time, maybe that means that not only am I enough in this relationship, I was enough back then, too. And that is a game you will always lose. Because the avoidant person that is typically picked for partnership by the people pleaser doesn't have the resources to be nurturing and loving and attended to. They're likely overwhelmed by the partner's people pleasers neediness.

And the narcissist will use it. The narcissist will use that neediness to exploit for their own purposes, use the people pleaser as a pawn. So it's very common for people pleasers to get retraumatized in romantic relationships frequently, and best friendships, for that matter.

### **Alex Howard**

I think what you're laying out with us is a really good example of how, in childhood, we are the victim of the circumstance that happens to us, and then in adulthood, we unconsciously become the architect of recreating those dynamics, right?

And so it's like in childhood, as you very artically laid out, that's the world we learn. But now we start setting up dynamics and becoming drawn to certain, and then it feels like this is how the world is, right? So then it reconfirms this narrative that no one takes care of me. I always have to look after everyone else. And what we don't see is how we've unconsciously created that reality by the people we've ended up in relationship with.

### **Matthias Barker**

Gosh, yeah. That's so well put. And that creates so much shame. I would imagine someone listening to this would be like, oh, crap. Well, then it is my fault, I am not good enough.

And I want to pause that tangent in the mind just for a moment. Pull back that spiral a little bit. Here, just to clarify what Alex said there, because that was so good, back when you were a kid, you did not have any ability to fulfill your own needs. You didn't. You're a child. You're completely dependent on mom and dad. You are.

And if mom and dad didn't fill those needs to the brim, you were left with no capacity or options to fill that yourself. And so to whatever degree, whether this is a huge degree, like full on neglect, big complex trauma, PTSD, or to smaller degrees of just parents can't read our minds, I think all of us, to a certain dimension, of course, have places emotionally that weren't seen by our parents, and then we blame ourselves for that.

That's what insecurity is when we talk about our insecurities, it's the places where we weren't seen as kids. And then we decided to blame ourself and think it was just something wrong with me. And that's the reality that undergirds this kind of dysfunction that we're talking about.

We're not saying, okay, this is all your fault. You're recreating this for yourself. If you would just chill and relax, everything would be fine. It's nothing like simplistic like that. It's, when you were a kid, this was the reality. You're an adult now, and you have vastly different resources available to you as an adult.

**[00:15:09] - Alex Howard**

I was going to say, I think you're about to go there, but that's the message of hope, right? Because then that's how we move from being the victim to being able to create change.

**Matthias Barker**

Precisely. The loneliness you experience, the dismissiveness you experience from other people, the look of withdraw you see in their eyes when you're vulnerable with someone and you can tell it's too much for them.

What happens is that reminds us of times as a kid when we experienced that withdrawal and there was nothing we could do about it. And then that's what creates this hopelessness and emptiness emotionally, in our own guts, in our stomachs. And we feel just as empty now as adults as we did back then.

But that's a trigger. That's not the reality. And this is a huge aha moment that I experienced personally in my own people pleasing tendencies and that I've walked clients through and seen incredible freedom.

When you see someone withdraw in the present, you have more resources now, you have more options now than you did back then. That's not a parent, that is a mutual adult.

Meaning you can withdraw on your intensity of vulnerability. You can withdraw on the dependence that you wish you could lay on their shoulders, and you can pull back and attune to what they genuinely need. Here's the key here, people pleasers are great at attending to needs in others that make them feel safe. They're not great at seeing the other 90% of the information that other people are giving us that has nothing to do with how it will make them feel about us. Okay?

What people pleasers do, they're not hyper empaths. Everyone confuses this. Oh, I'm an empath. I'm a people pleaser. No, those are not the same thing in my mind. True empathy can see the full range of someone's experience and desires and personality.

People pleasing is like, I look at this narrow margin of what can I do to get them to like me? That is less than 10% of the information that someone's giving you. And that might blow your mind because you're zooming up so far into that piece of information that it feels like it's all encompassing. Zoom out.

What does this person need outside of how they feel about you? This person is exhausted at work. They're in a marriage that they feel a little ambivalent about, they wish they were more interested and intimate with their partner. They're kind of irritated by their kids and they wish they weren't. They feel really guilty about it. They have a job that they feel like they really like, but they feel kind of insufficient. They're trying really hard, but they're worried they're going to fail.

Okay, none of that has to do with you, but that's fantastic information for knowing how to support them as a friend. And then you come towards them and be like, I'm not going to make you feel stupid or bad because I know that that's kind of a sensitive point for you, I'm just going to encourage you.

If there's a point where we disagree, I'm not going to jump into a big debate. I'm going to be really gentle and kind. I'm going to offer you gifts because I know that you like that. Like, you're going to jump into spaces that are more about loving them than it is about getting them to like you, and that is actually going to give you the intimacy that you desire.

**[00:18:06]**

It's not bad to want the intimacy. That's another thing. I'm not saying that you just need to love yourself, have tons of self compassion, and that will fill the hole. I don't think anyone buys that. We are relational creatures designed for connection. But childlike parental affection in friendships and in romantic relationships is not going to be the thing that heals that for you.

And you're trying to reach out to them like a child. And that's not me insulting you, that's me, technically you're trying to reach out to them like a child. And I'm saying reach out to them like an adult, and you will find that intimacy comes in a completely different way.

### **Alex Howard**

I want to start talking in a minute about some of the ways that we change this, but I think one of the blocks to doing that, and I'm taking a slightly more extreme example here, but one of the blocks to doing that is that we find ourselves in these sort of classic drama triangle relationships where there's the perpetrator, there's the person that's causing or the narcissist or whatever, and then there's the victim, then there's the rescuer. Right?

And so we become normalized to being in this rescuer, people pleasing helping role. And there are people that are genuinely in distress that we find our sense of safety by rescuing and being there for those people. But then we can find ourselves in extreme versions of this dynamic.

And so we can have someone. I have a sister that has very, very complex mental health issues. And what can happen is one gets in dynamic with her where there's all these threats of self harm and suicide and so on, and so there's this sense of I've got to rescue, and then you pull back and that behavior becomes more extreme.

And so I know, there's people that are watching this that will be thinking, but if I change how I'm in dynamic with these people in my life, then there are going to be consequences to that. And I think that's part of what gets people caught and then it's like we create a life and we become a prisoner of the world that we create.

### **Matthias Barker**

And my response right out of the gate to that dilemma is, well, is what you're doing now working? And just genuinely zoom out. Okay, well, I can't do anything different. Okay, well, is it working? And then, okay, go ten years down the road on this strategy, do you see this really working?

And then we start to feel hopeless. Well, we're trapped, we're powerless. There's nothing we can do. Like, oh, no, you have choices. You're just not sure you can survive them. And I'm here to tell you that the childhood you likely would have felt really overwhelmed and had a hard time surviving it on their own. But adult you has a whole different range of capacities and abilities.

So, for example, to make that more concrete, so let's say that I am in a kind of a toxic romantic relationship, and I really love them, but they are really kind of abusive and they use me and they don't listen to me, and maybe it's a narcissistic, abusive type of circumstance.

And at the same time, gosh, I really need the support. I need someone to kind of help jump in and rescue me. I think this triangulation that you're talking about, I notice really frequently with an alcoholic. When there's alcohol in the relationship, it's almost like triangulation between the drunk partner, the sober partner, and then the partner who has to witness everything. And there is kind of that similar triangulation.

**[00:21:41]**

Okay, so what do we do? The question is like, all right, what would it look like to set some boundaries and then to pull back on that relationship until the other person arrives at a form of stability on their own where they can be in safe, nurturing relationship with you.

Well, that's just going to make them mad. Sure. That's going to make them withdraw. They're not going to do it. Okay, tell me about the longing in you that can't let go of this person who's not choosing to meet you on healthy grounds.

And that will often stop people on their tracks. Be like, I can't. Maybe it's love. Maybe we have a child together. There's lots of good reasons. Often it's not mundane reasons, but regardless, I'm like, okay, but is what you're doing now working, like, ten years down the road with this person, is that what's best for your child?

Oh, you don't understand. It's going to be a nightmare. It's going to just explode if I pull back or if we separate, and it's like, yeah, is the explosion in the short term worse than the long term toxicity?

Let's really just think about that. You're right. It probably would be a huge blow up right now. But something like getting the help and support, maybe the protection that you need for you and your child, navigating the headache of court and custody. I'm not saying that's light at all. I think that is, for anyone who's been through it, that is a pit of hell. There are a few circumstances that are more stressful.

But what's the cost of staying here? And sometimes we get so nervous and overwhelmed by the cost of setting the boundary, and I'm not even saying that I have an opinion on which cost is higher, but just have you even considered, just count the cost, of staying on your own heart, on your own person?

And the longing that's there, is that really about the other person, or is that about you? Is that about something in the past? Because if it is, then maybe there's healing that can be there. Not criticism, not like, okay, it's all just in you. Just work hard, just decide, like, stop being a victim. None of that. I'm saying if it really is a longing in you, then there's ability and capacity to fill that longing outside of them, and that's hopeful.

And then that's going to be the place of stability that you'll be able to navigate the tumultuous circumstance of setting boundaries, whether it's an abusive partner, whether it's a parent. And I guess my big message to summarize that whole tangent would be, you can survive it, and there's a life on the other side that you might want more.

### **Alex Howard**

Yeah. It's almost like, I guess one of the impacts of being in the dynamics of those kind of relationships is that we don't realize how much energy has been taken away by the relationship, and then we end the dynamic, and we start to reclaim that.

So, Matthias, someone that's watching this, that I think often a good sign that something that's true for us is being pointed out is it's really uncomfortable. So I want to be empathetic to people that are watching this that is maybe a little excruciating right now because they're seeing elements of this.

But as the message of hope is there, what can one start to do if we recognize this people pleasing pattern of we're giving to others to try to get something back. What are some of the first steps in shifting this dynamic?



### **[00:25:25] - Matthias Barker**

I think an inventory of the past and specifically what should have happened. And what I mean by that is it's hard because in people pleasing dilemmas, we don't have these big traumatic memories in the past we can just point to and be like, ah, there's where the dysfunction was.

Maybe some of us watching don't have physical abuse, sexual abuse, an alcoholic parent, I had a pretty calm, relaxed childhood by all outside standards, why am I feeling so terrible? And I'm like, well, maybe the reason you don't have a memory of the traumatic thing was because your trauma is more about what should have happened, not about what happened.

And you wouldn't have a memory of that because it didn't happen and it should have. What were the times that you felt overwhelmed and lonely and you needed your mom to come into your bedroom and just be like, how are you doing? What's going on? What are you feeling? But instead you had to figure that out on your own.

What were the times that you were trying to get your schoolwork done and you were completely overwhelmed and that you needed someone to just break it down with you? Sit at the kitchen table as you finished it, rub your back. But instead you got a reminder that if you don't pass this, if you don't do this, then you're going to be grounded because you didn't get your grade up.

What were the times that whoever parent was working got home, and let's say it's dad, you wanted to go play in the backyard with dad. You wanted to be able to just wrestle around with him, feel this physical, tactile connection with your father, which every kid wants. But instead he jumped in front of the tv, he got on the computer, he was working late.

What were the things that should have happened that would have filled your cup but didn't? And you were left in the backyard alone. And here's why we go down that road. It's not just to start feeling terrible and all depressed, it's because those are the needs you're still reacting to now. And it's time for you to fill that need now.

The way I like to explain this is like if your parents left you a house in your will, that would be great. I didn't come from a family where I got a house from anybody.

### **Alex Howard**

Nor did I but it sounds great!

### **Matthias Barker**

That sounds nice, right? That sounds great. But let's say you're in a wealthy circumstance where your parents give you a house. Now, if that house is signed into your name, then it's your house now.

And let's say you go into the basement and there's mold in the basement. You can't then go to the seller of the house, your parents, and be like, hey, you need to fix the mold in the basement. You need to pay for a new water heater. You need to pay for this, that, and the other.

No house is in your name now. But that's not fair. I didn't put the mold there. I didn't use up the water heater. But it's your house. And in a similar way, when we become adults, we receive and inherit all the dysfunction, not just from our parents, but from legacy, from generations, dozens, hundreds, thousands of ancestors that you'll never know or meet.

You get to hold all of the stuff that wasn't done right, and that's the human condition. We all do that. Your kids will have to do that. That's just part of being here on this planet. It's yours now. What are you going to do with it?

**[00:28:37]**

And you can point the finger out and blame others, you can, but that's not going to move you closer to getting those needs met. I'm not even saying, like, that's a morally wrong thing to do or a pathetic thing to do. I'm not insulting you here. I'm not condescending. I'm saying in your own heart, what you deserve is to have those needs met. And you have to go down there and clean up the mold in that basement. And you should put on a mask and do it like an adult, not like a child.

And so there is this process moving into the past inventory of what should have happened, noticing what the needs were, I was often alone. My emotions weren't attended to. My fear was punished instead of nurtured. That's a big one. When I was scared, I would act out, and my parents thought I was being rebellious, and so they'd punish me instead of recognizing that I was overwhelmed. And then I didn't have the words or the ability to express it, and so I was pushing. So then I got punished.

Okay, what needed to happen, and then do you have the capacity, do you have the skill set to do that for yourself now? And to reach out to relationships now that can start to fill some of those buckets in a healthy adult way. So, again, practical example there.

I felt lonely. I felt like I never had anyone there for me. All right, what do you do in your own life to make sure that you have connection with people who are healthy? What amount of attention are you putting into your friendships, into community events? Are you active at your church or at a local homeless shelter? Do you have a pickleball team? Do you have some sort of way of reaching connection? Because you can manage that for yourself.

Do you have a mentor, someone who's older than you that can speak into your life? Not someone who will replace a parent, but someone who can guide you. Like, have you fought for those things, put in the legwork to give those things to yourself?

And maybe that feels like, well I wouldn't even know where to start on some of those things? Great. Start with one. Find a pickleball league. Find one step in that direction, because what you're going to find is the more you take these steps to give this inner child what they needed in order to feel full, the adult you is going to feel full. And that's a pretty powerful thing.

### **Alex Howard**

Yeah, I think this is a really important point because I think what often happens, as you're speaking to, is that we become the architect of the world based upon what we learned. And then we have lots of evidence that reinforces those beliefs that that's how the world is.

And so we might start to break the pattern of people pleasing, but then we're still left, and actually, maybe we're now feeling more these needs that are not being taken care of. But as you just spoke to, we've got to then learn how do we take care of those needs?

But then the narrative is, no one can take care of me and we've probably got a bunch of people in our life that are used to us rescuing them and we stop doing that, and then they're like, see ya, because it's like we're not doing the thing we do in the relationship.

And it's a little bit like that kind of experience of moving house. And you pack everything up and then that last night and all the furniture is gone, you're in an empty house sleeping on the floor with no bed. And it's like... Because we've got to make the space for something new to happen.

And I really like the point that you're making, that we have that responsibility to be proactive, to then go and create those changes. But that can also take some courage and it can be a place where, because of what we've been through, we perhaps feel even less resourceful than before.

So I'm curious as to what can help us navigate that territory of starting to take care of ourselves and to potentially take some risks in how we do that.

### **[00:32:25] - Matthias Barker**

Yeah, I love the way you put it. I mean, that house analogy is great. It's like, in order for me to hold on to something new, I need to let go of what's in my hand. Because a clasped hand can't grab onto something new.

And so there is this movement of letting go so I can hold on to something new. And you're right. I mean, those relationships with the avoidant and narcissistic people in your life that you think are going to be filling your cup do need to be let go and that is going to leave you with the impression of loneliness.

But what I say in those moments, too, I'm like, again, is what you're doing working now? Do you feel just like bubbling over with affection and connection now? Well, no. And I'm like, all right, well, are you just curious to see?

Often, maybe not with avoidant people, but with narcissistic people, you can always go back. Yeah, you can use me as a pawn again if you want, they'll be down for that. The reality is there is a letting go, but the trigger, the feeling that comes when, oh, I'm letting go, I'm setting boundaries.

I feel more lonely than ever. Again, that is emotion left over from the childhood self that had no recourse to do anything about it. The feeling isn't just loneliness, it's powerlessness. That's the thing that feels so heavy.

Adults can deal with loneliness. Powerlessness feels like a totally different thing. And I'm here to tell you you're not powerless. And so it is going to take time. Another thing just to note, because I think this isn't always obvious, but deep friendships take years to develop.

And that's just like a helpful, practical thing to understand is like, most of my deep best friends are five years plus minimum. And most of those friendships started pretty peripheral, meaning I didn't know they were my best friend when I first met them. They were just kind of someone in my circle for like three years. And then we really hit it off because we had a common hobby or something, and then we developed a friendship.

### **Alex Howard**

I also think my observation is exactly that. And then it's normally you go through something heavy and then you go, I can go through this thing and that person's by my side and that person's got my back, or they go through something hard and we show up to them. I often think that real friendships are not created when everything's easy and everything's fun. Real friendships are created when we discover who's got our back and whose back we can then have in return.

### **Matthias Barker**

That's right. I think of the stages of friendship there as you build a friendship on a trellis. So a trellis being like what you grow grapes on, right? So that's like the wooden beam that a vine will grow up on.

So you build friendships on a trellis like pickleball, I don't know, collecting something, going on hikes, joining a hiking club, co working together, working the register. All friendships start that way, I think a lot of people pleasers who are venturing out for the first time, they're like, oh, I just want this deep, emotional, rich connection right away.

**[00:35:22]**

And that's not even really what you'd want when you think about it. That's a very young way to approach it. Again, not an insult, just a technicality. A kid can just approach someone and just be like, oh, let's just be friends. Adults initiate connection with a few more rituals than that.

And that's important to know because you want to be able to vet someone and see if they're trustworthy. You need to pay attention to red flags early on before you invest a lot of trust and vulnerability, because what you don't want to do is go all the way 100% vulnerable to someone, then they turn out to not be capable of stewarding that well.

And then you get your heart broken or hurt or you get kind of criticized in a vulnerable moment. You get left hanging in a moment when you really needed someone. So there's a lot of benefit in taking it slow. And again, the internal feeling is, but I'm desperate for a connection, I can't survive it.

And that's that powerlessness again, from childhood, you're in a different circumstance now. So these slow initiations into recreational friendships to start. So my wife, for example, has a cookbook club that she runs every month. And it's a great place just to invite, like, peripheral friends and get to know them better.

And everyone will cook a dish out of the same cookbook, and the utility of it is, every month you can go with all your friends and there's like 10, 20 girls or something there, and you can try all the different dishes in this cookbook and you know which recipes you like and which ones you don't, and then you can go home and if you're cooking for your family, you can know which one, you're not going to waste a meal on a recipe that wasn't tasty...

### **Alex Howard**

Sounds great! And you get the leftovers, right?

### **Matthias Barker**

Yeah, precisely. I don't know. It's fun and it's light and it's not super deep. It's not really intense. So you just kind of go and you're just sitting there and you're chatting with people and you're like, how much common ground do we have? How many common interests do we have? And how many trellises can I build this friendship on?

So the good friendships are like, oh, we have kids who are the same age, we enjoy cooking together. Oh, we both like sewing, in that circumstance. My wife is always kind of running for folks kind of in those spaces.

For me, it's like I really love, a lot of my friends are entrepreneurs because we have a lot of the same problems, like with hiring people or trying to find contractors or trying to build a business, something like that.

So we have a lot to talk about. I really love hanging out with artists and creatives. I'm a musician. I love doing pottery. So I love hanging out with graphic designers and musicians. There's an energy around that that I get a lot out of. And you start there, and then you get to know who they are on these trellises of interest. And then you kind of move deeper and deeper.

And then that's when you say, I think that's like the move from just a recreational friendship to a deep friendship, is then someone goes through a divorce. Someone's parent dies. Someone's kid dies. And you're the one who shows up with flowers, with a meal. You're the one who calls and just checks on them.

**[00:38:14]**

Not just the day after it happens, not just the week, but, you know, the anniversary, you put it in your phone and you're checking in a year later, you're checking in months later because, you know it still hurts. And then that's the kind of trust where the vulnerability is earned. Not the merit is earned, the vulnerability and trust is earned. And that's the kind of deep connection, I think, that really soothes the soul, makes life worth living.

**Alex Howard**

And I think this is a great moment to make further that distinction between people pleasing and kind heartedness and true friendship, right? Because there's this example of what you just gave where that could be the people pleasing pattern coming in, right?

Like someone's in crisis. Right! I know how to show up. I can be that person. I can be there for them. And I'd love you to just sort of draw maybe the two pictures of the difference between the version which is the people pleasing and the version which is the kind hearted, like, we all want to live in a world where someone's having a hard time and people show up in a generous, kind way to that person.

**Matthias Barker**

Yeah, it's all motive. It can look exactly the same on the outside. People pleasing gives you a pretty sharp awareness of all the different ideas and things you can do to attend to people. But the people pleaser is there because I want you to like me. I want you to reciprocate and fill in me what's empty.

It's motivated by fear, ultimately. It's a fear based way of attending to people. Genuine, adult, mature, loving kindness is not fear based. You can feel it in the gut, you can feel it in the energy. You're not nervous that they're going to like it or not. You just care about them.

And if it's not what they needed, that's fine. Whatever you need. I cooked you a lasagna. Oh, we're dairy free. Oh, my bad. I'm sorry. Okay, I'll get you something different, instead of like... you can feel it in the gut, it's fear based or love based. I think that's the difference. On the outside it can look like the same behavior.

**Alex Howard**

Yeah. I also think that there's a difference between giving from a place of deficiency and giving from a place of abundance. Right? Like it's that thing of giving to someone because they're in need and we can. And it makes us feel good in our own heart to be generous to that person or that place where I'm deficient, but I know if I give to you, then I'm going to get something back. Or that I only know how to give and I can't...

I guess that's the other piece here, isn't it? Which is that learning how to receive. And often for people pleasers, right? They can give, give, give, but they struggle to receive.

**Matthias Barker**

That is so. And isn't that ironic? Because if I come off as a burden, if someone feels used by me, then I'm going to get rejected. And so the almost just shocking dysfunction of people pleasing is you give, give, give and hoping you'll receive. And then the moment there's an opportunity to genuinely receive, you back off from it immediately.

You underplay. You don't talk about your fears, your emotions, you don't talk about what you genuinely need because you're terrified if I burden them, then they'll leave me. Because that's what

happened to the kid. When you genuinely approached your parent with your needs. What happened? You were crying and you were left in your crib.

**[00:41:44]**

You were freaking out because something was really frustrating, you got a spanking or you got a timeout. And I'm not saying that, like, all discipline in those situations are abusive. Don't, don't take me out of context. I'm just saying in the emotional territory we're talking about here, there's genuinely this deep fear that if I show my vulnerability, they will leave or punish me.

And so we withdraw. And then again, the adult, mature, healed expression of this is, I let it in with attunement, so I don't let it in as entitlement. Right? That's narcissistic. I deserve or I'm entitled to this. I don't let it in and then take, take, take, take, take, take, take. It's attuned.

There's an understanding, a mature understanding that receiving a gift from you is best for both of us. You cooking me a meal when I'm grieving is actually sweet. It's a point of connection for both of us. You enjoy having a tangible way to help someone you love that gives your life meaning. I get a lasagna. That's good. It's reciprocal meaning making. That's how I see it.

How do you see that? What do you see that distinction being?

**Alex Howard**

Yeah, no, I think you put it well. And I think the piece around motive, I think is important. I think it's what we're trying to get from it. And I think it's also, I give to you because that's the world I want to live in and because it feels good to me to give to you, but there's no expectation of something back.

And I really liked the way you put it earlier. That's like, we build trust in friendship. And for me, I guess the distinction here is, is there reciprocity? Is this a relationship that goes both ways? And if we're giving and then we need and it's not coming back, that's often a sign that we're the people pleaser and they're the kind of narcissistic sort of person in that.

And I look at my close friendships, and I'm one of those people that doesn't. I know lots of people, and then I have a few people that are my really close friends, and I know those people. Someone said to me years ago, you can measure your true friends by the people you can phone at 03:00 in the morning and they answer the phone.

Now, we all put our phones on silent these days, at night if that stacks it, but metaphorically, I think it's the same thing. It's like, I know I had a big life event many, many years ago when I tracked down my father that I hadn't met. And it was like, I'm going to go and meet my father. And I was like, who are my friends that I want to know and I want to maybe come with me or I want to speak to before. And after that moment happens.

So to me, it's like, who are the people? Not are the people that we give to and we help and we rescue, but who are the people that we know, particularly for those of us that have those people pleaser tendencies, but who are the people that we know that we can make a genuine ask, and if that person is able to in a way that's sort of viable for them, they're going to drop things and say yes, because that's the reciprocity of relationship.

**Matthias Barker**

That's right. And I think different people are going to have natural ways of giving in those friendships that correspond to their personality. That's helpful to know as well. I think there's some people who are going to be great gift givers, and you can count that they know exactly what you

wanted because they paid attention to that little compliment you made to that six months ago and they knew you would like it.

### **[00:45:33]**

And then there's other people that are going to be there to help you move. They're like, I will show up. I'll stay late helping you pack boxes. And then there's other friends that are really the ones you confide in emotionally, that when you go through the divorce, your mom dies, like, you can talk and talk and talk, and it doesn't look like they're burdened. It doesn't look like they're overwhelmed. They look almost like at ease, like they're drinking it in. And that's what you need. You just need that presence. They're good at not fixing, just listening.

Other people who are hyper strategic, like, if you have a problem and you need someone to help you think through it, they're going to give you the blunt, true, hard feedback that you kind of need.

There's also, I think, diversifying your needs through friendships that is part of mature adulthood. That is like, I'm not going to try to place my entire maternal or paternal burden on you. I'm going to see you for who you are. I'm going to attend to you in the way I'm uniquely gifted to, and then I'm going to draw from you in ways that I know you're gifted and that actually fill you up when I ask you to do that, that's a big aha moment.

Some friends, if I ask them to help me move, will be delighted to help me, and it fills them up. Some friends, it's like I just insulted them. I will send you money.

### **Alex Howard**

If you ask me, I'm happy to pay for the removal truck.

### **Matthias Barker**

Yeah, let me send you cash. Like, anything. That's not them. But if I was like, hey, I need to talk through, like, my brother's going through a hard time, I need someone to listen. Oh, they'd be there for me in a minute. Other people, they'd be like, I'm sorry, man. That sucks. I don't know what to do.

So giving people that permission to be who they are, too, instead of being bitter and resentful towards them, is also, I think, a part of this arc as well.

### **Alex Howard**

Yeah, I know we're out of time, but one other point I want to make there as well is, and maybe this is more of a personal thing, but one of the things I also notice that my really close friendships and the friendships where there's a lot of reciprocity and kindness and not in a people pleasing way, necessarily, hopefully not.

It's where there's friendships on truth, where it's like, we can have the hard conversations and we can show up in our vulnerability, but we can also show up in our strength and our capacity. And it's like the most of us is welcome. And I think the ones, the relationships that are more difficult are where we have a narrower amount of ourselves that are allowed in that interaction.

### **Matthias Barker**

We can close with this, too, because I think it just sidecars, what you just said really well.

There was a study done on over 100,000 people for their romantic relationships, and they asked them, is your romantic partner your best friend? And then for folks who said yes, they were looking

at, like, what are the aspects of their relationship that make them their best friend? And so these are insights that apply to best friendships, not just to romantic relationships, which is cool. And the three top qualities that they found were communication, trust, and quality time.

**[00:48:32]**

And when I think of the people in my inner circle, like, I'm talking my top three, all three of those are in spades. Even if we live far apart, there's trust, communication, quality time. And the more that you have that with someone and it's reciprocal, think that the deeper that friendship is going to be, those are the folks you can call at 03:00 a.m.

**Alex Howard**

Yeah, that's beautiful. That's beautiful. Matthias, for people that want to find out more about you and your work, maybe they want to be in that inner circle. Tell us where they can go and also some of what they can find.

**Matthias Barker**

Sure. Well, you can find me on Instagram at [matthiasjbarker](#). That's my username there. It's my username everywhere on [TikTok](#) or [Facebook](#), wherever you hang out. [Matthiasjbarker.com](#). I do lots of workshops on relationships, healing from trauma. I'm a therapist, and so a lot of mental health topics are all around there.

I'm really thankful to be here, thankful to get to be a part of this conversation with this community. Alex, you're doing such an amazing job just guiding this whole group towards healing, just these deep, personal places. So I'm grateful to be here.

**Alex Howard**

Amazing. Matthias, thank you so much.

**Matthias Barker**

Yeah, thank you.